JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

FRANCIS J. MILLER

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Area news

Included in historic landmark inventory

Hardware store has historic background

The building that houses Miller's Ace Hardware was built in 1880. It's made of limestone, with several arched windows. (Herald-News photos)

Francis Miller, current owner, examines an old wine press in the store. He has been working in the store since 1918, starting by sweeping floors for his father after school.

By CATHY MURPHY
Herald-News Correspondent

LOCKPORT - Question: When is a hardware store more than a hardware store?

Answer: When a state survey has named it a historic landmark. Miller's Hardware in Lockport qualifies.

Miller's is the only building on the east side of State Street between Ninth and Tenth that remained standing after the great fire of 1895. Francis Miller, current owner, thinks he knows why.

"Mr. Frank Norton first owned this building," Miller said. "He used it as a general store after the one he had down by the mill became too small. He owned the mill at Tenth and the canal. This building didn't burn down because he also owned the water supply."

Ironically, the fire began on Norton's building.

"The fire started on the roof," Miller explained. "Some one was using a firepot with charcoal. It must have tipped over."

Once the fire began, Norton had to work fast.

"He turned off the main that supplied the rest of town and poured all the water he had on his own building," Miller said. "That's how he saved it."

Norton owned a well and a water line which ran around the downtown area. He sold to those who were willing to buy. The city itself had no water or sewer at the time of the fire. Thus, when Norton turned off the water, the town burnt down.

"The fire that started on this roof reached all the way to the old school building," Miller commented. "It must have been quite a blaze."

Back when Norton owned the building, it had a door and a staircase on the left side. Farmers would drop their grain at Nortons' mill, then climb the hill to the building and upstairs to Nortons' office where they were paid. The grain came in on the canal.

"Norton lived in what is now the McPhee Funeral home. His residence had a ballroom on the third floor, which he used often until about 1910.

"He owned the first bank in town and it went bankrupt," Miller said. "Everybody lost their money and all of Norton's property went to the Canal Commission. My dad bought this building in 1911 from the Canal Commission."

Millers father had started the family business in 1904, out of a small store on State Street.

Shortly after they expanded into their present building, Miller went to work for his dad.

"I've been working here since 1918," Miller said. "When I was a kid, I used to come here after school and sweep floors."

Miller attended Sacred Heart, which today is called Saint Dennis, in Lockport.

Miller has a collection of old pictures of his store. In the oldest one, a tin sign arches between two pillars on the roof of the building.

"We lost that in a tornado many years ago," he explained. "Our insurance people said it would be almost impossible to replace, since it was made of tin hammered out by hand."

There have been other changes since that early picture.

You can't leave merchandise sitting out on the sidewalk like you used to be able to," Miller observed. "Today it might get stolen. The police chief used to park his model T outside the store. And the old city water tower—that's gone, too."

Police work still runs in the family, however. Miller's nephew is Whitey Miller, the chief of police in Lockport. Another nephew works at the Hardware Store.

"My son works with the government in Hong Kong, but it looks like my nephew will be carrying on the family business," Miller said.

He may even be at it as long as Miller, who has some interesting reflections after working 57 years at the same intersection.

"We have given some thought to moving to a bigger building, but we would have to move to the edge of town," Miller said. "Here we're still a part of the downtown community. A little facelifting could make the downtown a great place. That's what the historical society is trying to do now, make the town antique."

Miller's Hardware is already quite an antique, with hammered tin ceilings and capped gaslamp pipes. Even the marble of the front step is worn down from close to a hundred years of being passed over by customers.

"We have our old customers and our new ones too," Miller said. "We draw people from Homer and Romeoville. We do quite a rural trade. Some people have been coming here for years."

When the hardware business began, Miller's father sold mostly cast iron stoves. Things have changed since then.

"We still have nuts and bolts like we did then, but we don't sell buggywhips anymore. We've kept up with the times. A lot of people are amazed to see such a modern line in such an old building.

Miller's Hardware has been in the same family longer than any other business in Lockport, as far as Miller knows. It was one of the first stores in the Ace line.

"We've been with ace 41 years," Miller said. "We got in when they were only a few years old."

Miller's has nine departments. That's a pile of merchandise displayed in a small space. Products hang from every pipe and beam, while both the upper story and basement are used to store stock.

The building itself was built in 1880. It's made of limestone, with arched windows in most places.

The glass in those windows has gotten wavy through time, and Connie Stevens looks out of place as she smiles from the sign in the window, saying: "Ace is the place with the helpful hardware man."

This Ace is also the place that was named in the Inventory of Historic Landmarks done by the Illinois Historic Landmarks Survey under the Illinois Department of Conservation.

That's quite a combination.

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JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWER: James R. Wilson

INTERVIEWEE: Francis J. Miller

INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Francis Miller for the Joliet Junior College Oral History Program by James Wilson at Miller's Ace Hardware Store, 938 South State Street in Lockport, Illinois, on February 11, 1976, at 12:30 p.m.

WILSON: O.K., Mr. Miller, I think probably the best place to start is with when and where you were born?

MILLER: I was born here in Lockport in 1909. I went to school here in Lockport and to De Lasalle High School in Joliet, and then I was at Marquette University in Milwakee.

WILSON: Did you graduate from Marquette?

MILLER: No, I didn't.

WILSON: Were your parents born in Lockport? Did they live around here all their lives?

MILLER: Yes, both my parents were born here in Lockport. My dad started this business, the hardware store in 1903 with another man by the name of Landon. They were down in the middle of the block down here. They bought this building in 1911 and moved up into here and then his partner died a couple of years later and he bought out his interest in it and has run it ever since. Then I had two older brothers that's been in the business here with me and my dad died in 1932 and my

oldest brother, the middle one and myself took over the running of the business. My oldest brother died in 1943, my middle brother died in 1951, so I have taken over the full ownership of the store.

WILSON: Where did you live in Lockport when you were born? Where did your parents live?

MILLER: When I was born, they lived at 809 State St. That was in an apartment, flats, as they called them then. Then when my grandmother died, we moved up into her place at 904 Hamilton St., which was about a 30-room house that she had up there. I lived there until I got married in 1934.

WILSON: What was Lockport like when you were growing up? In you early days here? Was it pretty much like it is today?

MILLER: Well, as far as the town is concerned, it has changed. I mean we had dirt roads at that time and there were not too many automobiles. There was a lot of horse-and-buggies then and one of the exciting things that the city kids used to see was when the farmers would bring the cattle to the railroad station and send them off to be slaughtered, they'd drive the herds right down 9th St. with possibly half a dozen men on horseback and they'd just herd them down and across the tracks and over to the Sante Fe. They had a corral where they used to put the cattle in, then they'd load them into the boxcars.

WILSON: About when was this?

MILLER: This was in about '22, '23, along in there.

WILSON: Just like the old West?

MILLER: Yes, it very much was like the old West.

WILSON: When was the last time you can remember them doing that?

MILLER: Oh, I was probably in 5th, 6th grade at St. Dennis School. That's when everything was all dirt roads, we had no what you call highways like we have now.

WILSON: When did they first pave the streets around here? Was that . . . .

MILLER: That was in the late '20's, they started from 5th St. and they went to what we call Division St. It was paved streets. And then it was quite a few years later before they finished the town from 5th St. north to First St., to the city limits.

WILSON: Did you have city water and sewer?

MILLER: Oh, yes, we had city water. Well, actually the fire in this town was in 1895 when the main business district burnt down. This building that we are in now was owned by the Norton Mill, which if you noticed down at the bottom of this hill here, this big stone building, well he owned that mill and he had a store on this corner of it, like a little general store. It got too small for him. See the farmers would come into town with their grain and dump it at the mill and then they'd go

into his little store where he had his office and get their money; and, of course, he'd sell them then their groceries, boots, shoes, and whatever he had. But it got too small down there so he built this building, and, if you notice, this building is built out of the same stone that building is. And, if you'll notice, all the steel piers or posts that hold this building up are shafts from a paper mill that he owned. As the shafts wore, he'd take them out and replace them, but they were good enough to make posts out of -- to hold up the store up here. He had the upstairs of this store as his office. They used to have a stairway over on that end of the building here. The farmers would go up there and get their money for their grain. Then they'd come downstairs here and buy all their supplies and that went on for quite a while. Mr. Norton went bankrupt, I mean his bank closed, and this happened, I believe, in about 1910, as my father and his partner bought this building at auction. The Illinois Canal Commission evidently had charge of his estate, but I don't know how this worked out, but anyhow they bought this at auction from the Illinois Canal Commission in 1911.

WILSON: You mentioned something about a bank. Did he have an interest in a bank there?

MILLER: He owned the bank, Norton did, but it failed. I don't know at just what time but I imagine it was around the same time that they closed out all of his estate, back in probably 1910.

WILSON: Do you remember when they -- the canal, not the canal, but this deep waterway went through?

MILLER: That was dug in about 1900 in the -- there's several pictures of that, the digging of it with the crude equipment, you know, like they used, the wooden beams, booms, and all this was made out of wood and the -- it was kind of like the gold rush from what they tell me, -- the town was really bustling at that time -- as a Mr. Miller (no relation), he had a big three-story building over there and he had a hotel. He had two floors of the hotel and a lobby on the main floor.

WILSON: You were talking about the canal and you parents, you say both your parents were born in Lockport?

MILLER: Yes, they were.

WILSON: Did your other ancestors go back beyond that?

MILLER: Yes, they did. My grandfather Gardner, that would be my mother's father, he was a captain on the I & M canal. He used to have his own, boat before they had motorized pushers -- they used mules and they used to have the towpath alongside the canal on each side with the mules.

WILSON: This was the original?

MILLER: The original I and M canal, which would go from La-Salle all the way into Chicago, with the mules pulling them. They'd -- see -- that was the barges that they were pulling.

And then I think it was around 1900 or so when they got the motorized pushers and he had that up until about 1910, that's when he retired.

WILSON: And did he travel the entire length of the canal?

MILLER: Yes. The I & M canal office, which is now the Will County Historical Society, was the main office for the canal and there was a lot of activity went on there. You see, they had -- if you'll notice down at the bottom of this hill here between 10th and 8th Street, there was two big landing docks and this was where the boats would come into and the people got off of them there and then they could go into the canal office over here at 8th Street. They have an entrance at the rear of the building that they could get into. And this is where all of your wagons and buggies and that would park down alongside of the landing there.

WILSON: They carried passengers as well as produce?

MILLER: I don't think they did -- I know my grandfather didn't. His boat was mostly for -- just pushing barges.

WILSON: Speaking of the barges did he -- was he employed by some company, or did he have an interest in his own?

MILLER: No, he owned his own boat. And I presume he was hired by different companies to haul these barges up and down the canal.

WILSON: Was that a franchise? Did he have to get -- pay something to get to operate on the canal or could he just. . .?

MILLER: No, I don't think so. I think he owned his own boat and he just made his own deals with the companies.

WILSON: A private hauler?

MILLER: A private hauler, yes.

WILSON: You talked about the cattle herds coming through, what else did you do as a child around here to. . . ?

MILLER: Well, -- games, the biggest thing in the winter time was sleigh-riding down the hills.

WILSON: I can imagine.

MILLER: You could always see 9th Street before it was a state highway you'd find 50, 60 kids out there and they'd have toboggans and sleds and course, you could go from the top of the hill all the way down to the railroad tracks and beyond, but you didn't have traffic involved in that time.

WILSON: There weren't a lot of cars around then like at this time?

MILLER: No, we had cars and buggies both, up until around the middle of the '20's.

WILSON: You still had buggies then?

MILLER: Yes, I can remember -- Saturday nights when the farm boys would come into town with their buggies and their dates and go out to the Gleaner's Hall to dance. /Laughter/

WILSON: Even up until the '20's?

MILLER: Yes, there was a lot of fancy buggies.

WILSON: You were probably a little too young to remember World War I or to have served in it. Did you. . . .

MILLER: No, I didn't. I remember, but that was 1918. I didn't serve then. I was still going to grade school.

WILSON: Yes, 9, 10 years old at the time. Do you recall what it was like around here during the war or were they -- say, with the draft or was there any, how did the people around here react?

MILLER: The only thing I can remember is the boys marching off to the war. I mean they used to go in contingents down here to the depot at 13th Street and board the trains there to take them into Chicago, but there isn't much of it that I can actually remember.

WILSON: Where did you say you went to school in Lockport and then you went to . . .

MILLER: Well it is now Joliet Catholic High School. It was De La Salle High School until about 1932, and that's where I graduated from high school. You see, the Christian Brothers had it. They started it in 1922, and it ran up until about 1932 and then the Carmelites took it over, and they still have it now and changed the name to Joliet Catholic High School.

WILSON: I've seen a lot of the schools and a lot of buildings

around here that are built from the stone of sandstone. There's some on the school over here -- what was that school?

MILLER: That was the Lockport Grade School, and they built a new school in Kelvin Grove; in fact, they built two out there. The first one they built was to take care of the lower grades, and they kept the higher grades at the old school here and then they passed a referendum to build another school to take care of the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, and that's what they call Kelvin Grove, or one is Kelvin Grove and the other one is Milne Grove School. And this school now is in the courts to try and decide whether it belongs to the city or belongs to the school board.

WILSON: When was that building built?

MILLER: Well, that building was built around 1875. And then the fire in 1895 burnt the building all out. It gutted it, and then they rebuilt it reusing the same wall.

WILSON: Those stone walls were left still? Do you know if that stone was from a quarry around here or . . . ?

MILLER: Yes, there's a lot of quarries around here in Lemont and Lockport. That's where all this stone comes from that you see in all these buildings. You see this building never burnt down at the fire. This was the only building in this block that was saved, and that's because Mr. Norton owned the water system, and the water system was for his mill over there. But what he

did, he fed the line up 11th Street and came down State Street, and, of course, he sold water as he went along and he, of course, ran a standpipe in here. We had a 2-1/2 inch standpipe all the way up to the roof. But anyhow he ran this water line to 9th Street and up 9th Street to Washington, and then he came back on Washington to 11th. His big home is where McPhee's Funeral Home is now. That was a big three-story building, and you see his son lived at the top of the hill at the corner, and another son lived at 10th and Hamilton Streets. So as he went around, he sold water to people that wanted to buy it. But when the fire started, there was a great big valve out in the street here, and it had a big wheel handle deal on it that he could shut all the water going beyond the building off; then he supplied all the water for his own building and kept it wet. But every store from this building on burnt down and the one across the street on 9th Street sent flying embers and caught the school on fire.

WILSON: This was around '95?

MILLER: This was 1895.

WILSON: What was the cause of the fire, did anybody ever find out, or?

MILLER: They said it was caused from somebody working, I believe, on this building. They used charcoal in fire pots and that they said, the wind or something, tipped it over and

caught it going. You see, we had no fire department in the town at that time.

WILSON: Were there a lot of injuries and deaths in the fire, or was it just mostly property damage?

MILLER: I think it was mostly property damage. I never heard of really any deaths from it. They got some help from Joliet but the biggest help came out of Chicago. They brought these steam fire engines down on flat cars on the Chicago and Alton Railroads. Now it's the G. M. & O. Railroad, and the canal, of course, was full then. This little canal down here, the I & M, and they pumped water out of that. That's how they got the fire out finally.

WILSON; Did it burn for a long time or was it rather . . .?

MILLER; I think it burnt all that day and part of the next day. In some of the pictures you can see it. They took out all the merchandise, and everything is sitting out in the middle of State Street. They emptied the buildings out before the fire got to them.

WILSON; They had time to clean everything up before the fire got to them.

MILLER; And that was the same year that they started, they organized, the volunteer fire department in this town.

WILSON; After the fire was all over?

MILLER: Yes.

WILSON: Let's see, the year you were born in was 1909. Do you remember -- what were you doing say in '29 when the depression started?

MILLER: Well, I was going to Marquette at the time. In fact I was up there in '28 and '29. Then I came into the store, in the late '29. I started working here full time. Of course, I worked in here ever since I was old enough to walk as far as doing odd jobs is concerned.

WILSON: How long did you attend Marquette?

MILLER: I was there for about two years.

WILSON: What were you majoring in? Did you have. . . .

MILLER: Mostly business administration.

WILSON: Just business administration. How did the depression affect your business here? Did you get hurt quite a bit by it, or did you. . .?

MILLER: Well, I just came into it at the time that we had the depression, but we weathered it. Things were a little tough, I mean; but, of course, with hardware, no matter whether you have a depression or not, people need supplies. You got to keep things fixed, and, of course, we had most all those different types of merchandise. We have about eight different departments here which covers quite a variety of things

you use for the home.

WILSON: When did you get married?

MILLER: In '34.

WILSON: This was after you'd been . . . ?

MILLER: This was after I worked for about five years.

WILSON: Was your wife from Lockport?

MILLER: No. She's from Joliet.

WILSON: Joliet. She's a local girl.

MILLER: Yes.

WILSON: You talked before about being in the hardware business. You carry -- what did you carry originally, say when you first came to the business? How many items, or was it strictly just mostly just small?

MILLER: Well, I'll tell you when my father first started, they did a very big plumbing business. The upstairs was completely plumbing shop, and the downstairs was hardware and stoves. Stoves were a big item in those days. Some of the early pictures we have at shows this whole floor full of base burners and kitchen stoves.

WILSON: Wood-burning?

MILLER: Wood-burning and coal-burning, and they used to have

a service. In those days people wanted to get their stoves out of the house in the summertime, so what they would do, they would pick up the stoves and they would clean and polish them and then store them. They had 200 stoves or so stored upstairs for the summer.

WILSON: These were stoves that they used for heating?

MILLER: These were stoves people bought. They were their own stoves but they would just service them. Then in the fall they used to have the horse and wagon, and two men would take the stoves out and put them -- install them again. Put up the stoves and put up the smoke pipe and everything and have it ready for winter again.

WILSON: These were the ones they used for heating -- they didn't . . . ?

MILLER: This was mostly for heating. The cook stoves they used year round, but it was strictly the heating stoves that they stored. And, of course, they were into a lot of farm implement items then, that is smaller items; but that was one of the big major items they sold was stoves, heating stoves. In those days all you had was coal and coke to burn.

WILSON: You talked about farm equipment or farm supplies, what did they carry in the line of those? Is it mostly. . . ?

MILLER: Most of the items we had was like pitchforks, and the block and tackle, the fence stretchers, and wire, field fence, all different things that farmers used around the

premises. They never sold any machinery of the larger units.

WILSON: Were most of the farms around here, at that time, were those mechanized to a great degree or were they all still using the horses?

MILLER: Well, they were still using the horses when I first used to go out to the farm. They had the threshing machines. That was another big deal in the summertime, that was going out to the farm when they were threshing, because the farmers got together and they owned the machines, the threshing machines. And they'd have a crew and they'd go from one farm to the other; and, of course, as kids we would like to get out there about noon because there was always plenty to eat.

WILSON: Get out in time for the meals and . . . .

MILLER: But then during the war when there was a shortage of help in men to do the farm work, the merchants would close their stores at noon on Wednesdays and they'd go out on the farm and help the farmers with the threshing -- and I can remember going out with maybe 25 merchants and helping them with the bailing machines and the threshing machines and hauling the bundled wheat into the threshing machines.

WILSON: This was during the First World War?

MILLER: Yes, this was during the First World War.

WILSON: You mean they did this just as a matter to help out?

MILLER: To give them a hand because they couldn't hire. See most of the young lads had gone to the service and there was none of these people available that the farmers could hire.

WILSON: When, say when you came into the business, what did you carry -- I know you didn't carry a lot of the things that you got now, but . . . ?

MILLER: Well, a big item at that time, we were just getting into the radio business. We were selling radios and Majestic was very big at that time. We done a great job with Majestic radios. And then, of course, they went bankrupt in about 19, I think it was, well, the late '30's; and then we got in with Philco. This is Philco before any television was on. We used to sell quite a few big radios, and that was one of the jobs I had at the time, was installing antennae and setting them up.

WILSON: They used an antenna with those, right?

MILLER: Yes, they did. Yes, they'd have to use an antenna.

WILSON: Something like a TV antenna today, or was it just. . ?

MILLER: No, it was just a copper wire. We'd put two insulators, one on each end of it and then fasten it between two buildings or -- between a tree and a house. Then you'd run the lead in down from the copper wire and run it into the house and hook it on the radio, probably put a lightning arrestor on the outside. But I put many of those up through this town and through

the country here.

WILSON: Most of the -- what was the closest radio then? Was it out of Chicago, was that the closest? Were there any in Joliet?

MILLER: Chicago was the closest then. The first sets we got here were -- crystal sets, you know, you had to pick them.

WILSON: You had to use the earphones with those?

MILLER: Yes. I can remember the first one we ever got. We used to have it sitting on the shelf back there. Everybody thought it was great to go back and put the earphones on and try to pick a station -- but the Joliet station didn't start till much later.

WILSON: Well, let's see, what else -- we talked about radios did -- most your hardware stores now carry -- just about anything. I know you have quite a variety here. When did you start branching away from the original, traditional hardware type of thing?

MILLER: Well, actually we never did branch away from it. We still got the full hardware line, I mean; and, of course, we get people coming from all over because they know we have practically everything here. The saying is "If you can't find it at Miller's, you can't find it anyplace!" /_Laughter_/

WILSON: Not around, hey?

MILLER: But we do carry a big line of hardware and we get into plumbing supplies and electrical supplies, paints, and there's sundries, and we're into certain amound of sporting goods; and housewares is a big item with us, two -- lawn and garden is another big item, too. We carry quite an extensive line of lawnmowers and all the other type of garden supplies -- and seeds.

WILSON: Did you -- do you remember very much about -- say World War II? You were a little older then. Did you serve?

MILLER: No, I didn't. That was the time that my brother died and I was the only one left here at the time to run the business so that was the only reason I didn't go.

WILSON: Did the war have a big effect on say the economy around here? Did that . . .?

MILLER: No, I wouldn't say it had any effect on it. I'd say business actually increased as long as you could get the merchandise. That was the big thing.

WILSON: Were a lot of things rationed?

MILLER: Yes, an awful lot of things were rationed but we got a good share of merchandise from Ace. Ace was very good that way. They didn't take any new stores in during the war. They figured what stores they had they should give them what merchandise they got, and that's the way they handled it. I can remember the Vice-President up at Ace going out in the warehouse

when the shotguns shells came in and sorting them out himself, so he made sure that every store got his share of them. Of course, a lot of those things, batteries, flashlight batteries, and that was all rationed.

WILSON: What other things did they have? Like you just mentioned shotgun shells, batteries, was there quite a few items that were rationed?

MILLER: Well, anything that was actually made out of brass and copper was hard to get, cause they rationed all those items. And the -- well, steel was another thing, like your shovels. I mean they were -- anything that was made of steel was also on allotment, too, cause we couldn't get all we needed in shovels and rakes, hoes and things of that type.

WILSON: Have you always been, has this always been with Ace Hardware or has this . . . ?

MILLER: We've been with Ace since 1933. That's when we joined. We were one of the early stores. Ace was five years old when we joined.

WILSON: You are just, actually a distributor?

MILLER: Well, no, -- actually the distributor is Ace. Ace -- they supply us with all our merchandise; and, of course besides that they supply us with the advertising -- and we have their own line of paints but all our merchandise comes from Ace.

WILSON: But you do all your purchasing through Ace Hardware?

MILLER: Through Ace -- that's right. We've enjoyed our arrangement with Ace because -- we've been able to get practically everything we needed, and that's what we couldn't do with any other jobber because you'd have to go to maybe a half a dozen or more to get all the different things that you needed. Here you are getting everything from one concern and you're buying it right -- that's another thing.

WILSON: Before you joined Ace, was it a matter of traveling salesmen coming through and selling you stuff or selling your father . . . .?

MILLER: Yes, cause we used to buy goods from A. C. Simmons. That was a jobber in St. Louis, and we used to buy from Ebberd, Spencer and Bartlet in Chicago. And then we'd buy our washing machines from, I think it was Maytag we had at that time, and our stoves came from the Moore's Stove Company in Joliet. And several different companies we had to do business with to get all the things that we needed, where with Ace we can get all our items out of one source.

WILSON: What about the -- the politics in Lockport -- have you ever been involved very much in politics or in the . . . ?

MILLER: No, I've never been involved in the elected politics. I've been involved with the volunteer fire department. I joined that in 1930 and I retired in around 1965. We come a long way

since then. I mean we've formed a fire district in around 1938, and the only reason we did that was so we could get more money to buy more equipment.

WILSON: Does that cover Lockport, and what area does the fire district cover?

MILLER: It covers Lockport Township. It covers 36 square miles and that's why you'll notice that Crest Hill over there is involved with the fire d strict. That's who handles all of Crest Hill. They have a station over there.

WILSON: But that's part of --

MILLER: That's part of Lockport Township Fire Department.

WILSON: And do you have a station here in Lockport? Is that the only two?

MILLER: The Number One station is here in Lockport, yes. They built that out here on Route 7. When we first started, we were in the city hall over here at the north side of it. That was the fire station; but then it got too small, and, of course, the district went out there and built this big building.

WILSON: What kind of equipment did you have when you, say, it was around 1930?

MILLER: When I started with them, we had what you'd call a tank. We had one they call a pumper. We had to hook it up to a hydrant or you had to suck water out of a creek. And we had

that until, let's see, about 1931. We decided we needed a tank truck, something to carry water with, so we got Farrel Manufacturing in Joliet; they were tank builders. They built us a regular tank truck at that time it was a Reo chassis, so we could carry 500 gallons of water to a fire. See an awful lot of our fires were over in Chaney which is now Crest Hill. And you'd get over there and you wouldn't have any water supply, cause they had no water supply either. So we had two pieces of equipment up until -- well, it was right after World War II when we could buy some equipment and they bought two big pieces of equipment from the government. And one of them they made into a 1,000 gallon tank truck, and the other was just a regular pumper. And then when they went into a district, the district traded those off and got into American La France equipment. All the equipment we have now is American La France. And they've got, about well, there's at least six pumpers and they've got an aerial truck and a light plant and about three ambulances and we've got a big tank truck. They've got quite a bit equipment now.

WILSON: Three ambulances you say that they have?

MILLER: Right at Station Two they have an ambulance over there and they have a pumper and they've got another aerial truck over there.

WILSON: When you started, was it strictly all volunteer?

MILLER: Yes, all volunteer. The telephone operator used to

call you then and say there's a fire at 938 State Street and everybody that could would go. She'd just call the fellows that were firemen, and you'd get in your car and you'd head for it. The fellow at the garage down here would take the fire trucks.

WILSON: You'd need one man down there to bring the truck over?

MILLER: Well, we had the trucks in a public garage. It was that way until we got into the fire district. They had hired men then. But we had a lot of good cooperation in those days, because everybody worked together. They're all volunteers.

WILSON: Is there still use for volunteers or is it . . .?

MILLER: They still have volunteers. We have paid men in the district. They're all paid men, and we still have the volunteer group, and there's about, around 25 or 30 of those volunteers. But they have around 20-some paid men that work around-the-clock, and they're at both stations.

WILSON: Were you -- I imagined those thirty years and it sounded like you must have been involved in some -- quite a few calls. Were there any bad ones after the fire of '95?

MILLER: Well -- I can remember one bad one we had here at the cereal mill when the Number Two mill, which was over on the other side of the tracks, that thing burnt out. This happened

about 6 o'clock one night, and that burnt for five or six hours before they got it out.

WILSON: I'd like to find out a little more about -- I keep going back to this -- but say your parents, your grandparents -- how far back can you trace back in the Lockport area?

MILLER: My Grandfather and Grandmother Miller, they came from Germany and -- my Grandfather Miller used to have what they call a draying service here in town. You see, in those days all your freight came in on the railroad, and you had to have somebody to deliver from the railroad to the stores, and that's the type of business that he had and he was in that for quite a few years. They had the horse and wagons then.

WILSON; When did he come here?

MILLER; --I believe it was in -- around 1875.

WILSON; Did he come -- was this the first place he lived when he came over here?

MILLER; That, I can't tell you. You know I think I am wrong on that date, though cause I think they came over here in -- at least 1850. Because the home that they had up there was built way back in those days, around 1850, and my dad was born here, so I know it had to be around 1850 when they came over.

WILSON; Do you recall any, anything ever being said about

whether he served in the Civil War or in the Union Army?

MILLER: My grandfather? Well, I don't know, I don't know too much about it. He died when I was very young. All that I can remember actually of my grandparents on the Miller side was my grandmother. He died when I think I was only five or six years old. My grandmother lived up in that home up until the day she died.

WILSON: Where was this house located?

MILLER: It was on 7th and Washington Streets. It was right across from the creek. She had a big garden there on the corner.

WILSON: Did a lot of people in Lockport itself, have gardens and keep . . . . ?

MILLER: Yes, there was quite a few.

WILSON: How about livestock? Did they keep livestock?

MILLER: Not so much livestock in town. Most of your livestock was out on the farms. You see, the farms were right on the edge of town and now this area is Kelvin Grove. . . .

WILSON: You're talking about Kelvin Grove, and . . .?

MILLER: You see, that was Milne's farm. And that was right on the edge of town. You see, that's been turned into a subdivision now.

WILSON: What did -- what was the main crops of the farmers around here?

MILLER: Oh, it was mostly corn and oats and barley and beans.

WILSON: What -- kind of beans? I'm trying to think, was it soybeans or was it . . . ?

MILLER: I don't think they had soybeans then. I don't remember.

WILSON: I don't think -- I don't know.

MILLER: I don't know what type of beans it was, but I know the big items were strictly oats, barley and corn. Cause most of your farmers, if you go through the country in the summer-time, you can see all the stalks and wheat fields. You see, we didn't have any subdivisions around here in Lockport; it was strictly a small community.

WILSON: Strictly a small town.

MILLER: Yes.

WILSON: You talked about the Crest Hill over here, was that -- now that's practically right next to Joliet, property you know, just runs together. I assume that at one time then it was just a small town?

MILLER: Well, actually it was like -- a subdivision of Joliet; it was never in Joliet though. It was always part of Lockport

Township. But it was so close to Joliet, I mean, a lot of people thought it was just part of Joliet. You see, this township is spread out quite a bit. I mean you take that area over there, you'd never tie that in with Lockport or Lockport Township. But they always had their own school and everything over there, but all those buildings all the way down to Theodore Street, that was all Lockport Township. Now the Rubberoid is in Lockport Township and the Phoenix Horseshoe is in Lockport Township.

WILSON: What is that?

MILLER: Those are those buildings, those factories, that you see when you go down the Bluff Road, Route 53, all down the hollow like, down by the river. You see they now call the Rubberoid GAF. Phoenix is still over there. But that was all part of Lockport Township. And if you notice this 16th Street, how crooked that road is when you go across it. You see that used to be a straight road across but the only thing over there then before they dug the canal in 1900 was the DesPlaines River. When they dug the canal through, that's when they had to change the position of the road, because they had to put a bridge in, so they had put it straight across. So that's why you've got the big jog at the west of the bridge. And there used to be a paper mill over there. When you'd make the turn on the stone abutments down there. That was part of what the mill used to set on. Looking at these pictures this is the mill I was

telling you about, and here is the general store on the corner of the building. He had a sign up on the top of that building. And that's the I & M Canal, and here's some of the boats that used to pull up alongside and load on the grain and take it into the manufacturers.

WILSON: This is the original . . . .

MILLER: That's the original, that's the I & M Canal. That's the one right down at the bottom of the hill here.

WILSON: This is the building that burnt?

MILLER: No, no.

WILSON: This one got too small or . . . ?

MILLER: No, you see Norton had several buildings. You see this one is one on the east side of the canal, and there was a bridge there. There was two or three plants on the west side right over there. That's just another picture of it; it shows the wagons and they're bringing the grain into the elevator.

WILSON: You say that your grandfather was in the drayage business and he . . . . ?

MILLER: My Grandfather Miller was, yes. He used to have something like this type of a wagon and haul freight from the depot. You see, the depot was on 13th Street and he delivered to the stores --- Now this picture is of the hydraulic mill.

They had what they called a turning basin. The canal came this way and then they had the canal open, like this here. You see, this was all out of here. And the boats could turn around here, at this point. This is what they called the turning basin. And this hydraulic mill is on the other side of the turning basin. You can see the length of those boats there, where they had to have something to turn around.

WILSON: Now what did this hydraulic mill -- what was that just a regular grain mill?

MILLER: That's right, yes. It's the same. That's just another picture of the same one. Now here's the paper mill I was telling you about. That's part of the Des Plaines River coming down here -- the Des Plaines River was kind of tied in. It was in two sections when it got down to 16th Street.

WILSON: These were all part of the Norton?

MILLER: J. L. Norton Company. This was all part of it.

WILSON: The paper mills, the hydraulic mills, the grain elevator. You say he had a bank, too, and the whole thing went -- this was just about the time of the fire.

MILLER: I don't have a picture of the bank. This was after the fire.

WILSON: But sometime in that '95, '96?

MILLER: No, this was after, 1900, these changes. A good place.

WILSON: Any idea to as to what happened? Did he just over-extend himself or . . . . ?

MILLER: I couldn't tell you. I never could get a direct answer from anybody on it.

WILSON: Nobody wants to talk about it, huh?

MILLER: A lot of people in Lockport lost money in the bank. I know that.

WILSON: This was before the time of the FDIC and . . . ?

MILLER: Yes, it sure was.

WILSON: When you started out, I know prices have gone up a lot, to where . . . But has there been -- what were some of the typical prices that you, were like talking about pitchforks, and . . . ?

MILLER: People would buy one for a dollar and a half; now you're paying $6.95 for it. Bought nails for a nickel a pound.

WILSON: Probably no where near the quality that you were . . . ?

MILLER: The quality is pretty good on tools and that. Things were made -- pretty well, I mean. You didn't have as much defective merchandise as what you have today. And a lot of it, the reason for it is the manufacturers just don't inspect the goods enough. Merchandise gets out and gets into the dealers' shelves. You just don't know anything is wrong with it until

the customer buys it and takes it home and he can't get the toaster to pop up the toast or it burns the toast black. These are just functions that could have been taken care of when it went through the assembly line. Like the thermostats could have been adjusted properly. There's a lot of little things like that. You send more merchandise back to the manufacturer now than you ever did. Of course, the reason we send it back is because people bought it here and they bring it back to us. A lot of your discount places -- they won't bother with it; they say, "You bought it, you send it back to the manufacturer who made it." But here they say "we bought it at Miller's" so Miller's take care of it. And of course that's one of the things that's kept us going and service is a big item.

WILSON: That's what brings people back. I know I've, I've shopped here and I've, I've found a thing that impressed me most more than anything else is the fact that you can get in here and you can tell one of the clerks I need a little piece like this and it does this, --"I know just what you want, you come over here."

MILLER: But this is what people want today. I mean they're so tired of going into a store and they can't find what they want and there's nobody they can ask and if they do ask anybody they don't know where it is.

WILSON: They don't have the time or they don't . . . .

MILLER: They don't have the time or they don't want to wait on customers. All they want to do is fill the stock and or kabitz. It's a big item, the fact that we do give service and I mean we try to help people out with their problems.

WILSON: Are you involved with some of the service organizations in Lockport, The Lions Club?

MILLER: Yes I do. I belong to the Lions Club and I belonged to them for about 15 years. And I'm a director at the Heritage First National Bank here in Lockport.

WILSON: How long have you been with them, -- been on the board?

MILLER: With the bank?

WILSON: Yes.

MILLER: I've been on there board about, 12 years.

WILSON: What does the Lion Club involve? Is that -- what do they ah. . . .?

MILLER: Well their biggest thing that the Lions Club does is for the blind. Take care of a lot of the blind people. I mean as far as helping them with getting them glasses. And also getting them these dogs. That's where a lot of their money goes. And they do help on local projects, too. They help a lot of local people with glasses.

WILSON: Are they involved so much in training the dogs or just?

MILLER: They have nothing to do with that. The Hadley School is where they donate a lot of their money and that's who trains the dogs and gets the proper dog for the proper type of person. But it's a good cause. And they have their candy days, they have their broom sales and they have their fruitcakes sales. They do pretty well I've noticed. And then I've been an director with the Civic & Commerce Association, for about 30 years.

WILSON: Is that, something like the Chamber of Commerce or is it. . . . ?

MILLER: No, the Chamber of Commerce is a newer organization we've got in town. The original one was the Civic & Commerce which was for -- well, they've done more work projects, like getting the roads through or getting the bridges fixed. Just like this 16th Street deal they've been working with the highway commissioner to see if getting some stop lights over there and getting the bridge fixed. And they were instrumental in getting the road between Lockport up here and Romeoville put through. That was back in the late '30's. That's the type of work they do mostly. They have the retail division, too.

WILSON: That's the one that branches off of 171 and goes through to Lemont and over that way.

MILLER; Yes. That road was the one from the north end that pointed to Romeoville. See from there on it's Cook County.

That's the dividing line. But they have helped with an awful lot of projects. And they're the one that just put out this book about Lockport last year. Now that covers the schools, the athletic activities, it covers the churches. It's a booklet that we can give to a newcomer. It tells where the hospitals are, it tells where the different stores are, and the churches, and all about the park district's athletic activities.

WILSON: Does this do to kind of work to help attract new industry to Lockport and to promote it as a place for industry?

MILLER: Well, it -- the main reason it was put out, was more or less, to give to new people coming to town. You see the Texas Refinery up here have a lot of changes. I mean they have new engineers coming in and different people and something like this they can give to them that tells them where all the different things are in Lockport.

WILSON; Just looking here at something that, I'm glad you brought this book out cause I was planning to ask you about this and it slipped my mind. What can you tell me about Dellwood Park down here?

MILLER; Well -- Dellwood Park was built by the C & J Railroad Company. That was the streetcar company that used to go from Joliet to Chicago. They built that as a recreational center for -- see they could bring people down on streetcars from Chicago for recreational activities on weekends -- then when the auto-

mobile came to being why it kind of faded out a bit and it stood there for a long time and it was not active and then a park district was formed around that time and the park district bought it. Dellwood Park had a lot of recreational activities going on there. They had one of the best dance pavillions around this part of the country. And they had it right up until the day it burnt down. They used to have all the big bands; come to Dellwood Park.

WILSON: Was that located on the river -- was that -- what river was that?

MILLER: No, it was a canal. The Dellwood Park is down here on the east side or Route 171. And that's the waterfall -- that was water that came in from all through the country and filled into this here creek that they had at Dellwood Park and then they had the falls there and it went on over into the I & M Canal. But this all came from drainage from all out through the country out through Homer.

WILSON: Was this a catch basis and drain water would drain into that and it was then funneled into the canal?

MILLER: They had a lot of equipment in Dellwood Park. They used to have a scenic railway and they had the big tower, it was more of a recreational center where they had all of the machines where you could look into. You used to spend a nickel to look at all the pictures and this is the type of

equipment they had in the tower. You see the center of this thing was a great big tower that they used to light up.

WILSON: This was the dance, where the dance ah?

MILLER: No, this wasn't where the dancing was. The dance hall was down possibly a half a block or so from there. This was more or less the central point of the park.

WILSON: You said something about a fire over there. Did the whole ah . . . ?

MILLER: Well this was after the park was -- had closed up. I mean, but they did use the dance hall but there were several mysterious fires down there. Like the -- in the ballpark, the grandstand, that burnt down one night.

WILSON: They had a ballpark?

MILLER: Yes, they had a very good ballpark. And then they had what they call a flat iron stand which was down near the dance-hall and that was strictly refreshment stand. And they had a movie house, and then they had a band shell or stand that -- well, you can still see part of it. The bottom base of it is still there. That's out in the front part of the park.

WILSON: When did the park close down?

MILLER: The park, well, let's see, there was a few years in between the time they closed up and the park district bought that. I think the park district got it practically at the end,

around the end of the '30's. And it laid pretty near dormant there for I think, with exception of the dance hall, they used to use that all the time, for about 10 years.

WILSON: You say this was owned by the railroad and it was just a matter that business fell off?

MILLER: Well, when the automobile came in, you see, the business just fell off, because what they used to do, they would bring in, I can remember 10, 15 streetcars being lined up in the park where they'd bring down the People's Gas or people like that from Chicago would have a picnic there on a Saturday. This was the idea of the park, was the reason they built it was for that purpose was to bring all these people in to use their streetcars.

WILSON: Since you have lived around here for a while now, can you tell me something about Romeoville? How long, what was there there before they started building all the subdivisions. Was it strictly -- ?

MILLER: It was just a small community. They used to have a city hall there and there was one general grocery store. And, of course, the beach was the big attraction, they had a swimming beach there they called Romeo Beach.

WILSON: I've heard people talk about it.

MILLER: Yes, the Commonwealth Edison bought it about 2 or 3 years ago. But that was a big place.

WILSON: Where was that Romeo Beach at?

MILLER: That was right across the road from the Union Oil Company, south on 135th Street. We used to go swimming up there in the summer time -- they used to cut ice there in the winter and then the kids would use it for swimming in the summer. But it was a regular beach that you had to pay to get into. On Sundays, 200, 300 automobiles would be out there. They'd used it for picnics.

WILSON: Was that a lake or was it a part of an old quarry?

MILLER: That was part of an quarry.

WILSON: You talked about cutting ice, did they use that commercially or just people cutting their own ice?

MILLER: No, the Bruces owned it. And they had a great big icehouse there, and in the wintertime they'd have a team of horses out there and they would cut the ice and they'd pull the ice into the icehouse. There was, in fact I've had people tell me, they've lost teams of horses in there when they fell through the ice and drowned.

WILSON: Did they more or less, they sold the ice?

MILLER: Yes. They used to have an icehouse here where they sold ice to people, and then they used to deliver too.

WILSON: In Lockport here?

MILLER: Yes.

WILSON: There's a house in Romeoville. Right on the corner of 53 and Naperville Road, I assume that place has been there for . . . . ?

MILLER: That place has been there for a long time.

WILSON: You were talking about the lady that you say her daughter was a . . . ?

MILLER; Well -- her daughter lives in the house now. She's probably about 75. I presume that they sold that property. After she's dead it probably goes to whoever bought the other property out there at Hampton Park. I think her name was Phelps. That could be her maiden name.

WILSON; Well you've been -- 65 years now in hardware most of your life. Have you given any thought to retiring; are you going to enjoy the work and just gonna . . . .?

MILLER: Well, what I think what we'll do mostly is to take trips like we've been doing; but as far as retiring and getting away from that, I don't think that is what I'm going to do, cause it actually, this has been my life and I don't -- I can't see just quitting and doing nothing. But we've been taking a trip every year, and we'll take one in the winter time, in fact next week early we are going to go down to -- to Freeport. It's an island down near Nassau. And then my son is over in Hong Kong. We spent a month with him last September. He works for the State Department.

WILSON: You say your son is with the State Department in Hong Kong.

MILLER: Yes. Well he's been with, well he's been over in Hong Kong since December of '74.

WILSON: I assume he doesn't have any plans to go into the hardware business then?

MILLER: No, he's an attorney. He's not working at it. He likes the work he's doing. He's been with the Bureau since 1965 and they just sent him over there last December. Or December of '74. I imagine he's going to be there for four years anyhow.

WILSON: I want to thank you very much for your time and wish you every success in the hardware business.

MILLER: O.K.

WILSON: Thank you.

MILLER: Thank you.

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